DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 612 EA 028 043

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TITLE Women Superintendents: New Role Models in Leadership for Change.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (51st, New Orleans, LA, March 16-19, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Qualifications; Career Development; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Mentors; Occupational Aspiration; Sex Stereotypes; *Superintendents; *Women Administrators
IDENTIFIERS *Virginia

ABSTRACT

Women outnumber men in school-administration graduate programs and in the teaching ranks of American public schools; however, women continue to be underrepresented in the superintendency. This paper presents findings of a study that identified the personal and professional characteristics of Virginia's first women superintendents. Data were derived from interviews with an unspecified number of female superintendents. Findings show that the women began their careers as teachers, did not originally seek the superintendency, and stayed in the classroom longer than their male counterparts. Women spent more time obtaining a variety of educational experiences than most of their male colleagues. They followed self-determined routes to the superintendency rather than a hierarchical career path. They utilized the following strategies: (1) Set clear and specific career goals; (2) use a variety of strategies to overcome perceived internal and external barriers to advancement; (3) use mentors effectively; and (4) consult one's own attitudes and ideas about the superintendency. (LMI)

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ED 401 612

WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS: NEW ROLE MODELS IN LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE

by
Elizabeth D. Morie and Bonny B. Wilson

Introduction

This presentation derives its findings and conclusions from a research project conducted on the first women superintendents in Virginia(1981-1995). The research has been done to address the issue of the meager representation of women among district superintendents of this nation. Women are in the majority in school administration graduate programs, and there are more women than men in the teaching ranks of the nation's public schools. Yet there is a persistent absence of women from the highest and most powerful administrative position in public education, the superintendency. This dilemma has been characterized by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) as a major challenge of the profession in the 1990s.

Our initial research efforts revealed that there was virtually no data base on Virginia's women superintendents. It had never occurred to our state department of education that such data might be useful--from either a practical or historical perspective. At the national level, the AASA decade studies on superintendents contained limited data on women. Numerous dissertation studies on the Virginia superintendency have been completed; still women who aspire to becoming superintendents have had no opportunity to learn about or reflect on the experiences of women as they have attained this top leadership position.

The primary purpose of our study was to contribute to the research on women superintendents by describing the personal and professional characteristics and career stories of Virginia's first women superintendents. Data were gathered about their career paths, mobility, perceived barriers to success, mentors, professional experiences and preparation, attributions for success, job satisfiers and dissatisfiers, exit patterns, and recommendations for increasing the number of women in the Virginia superintendency.

A second purpose of the study was to document and share the women superintendents' stories with aspiring women as a means of introducing them to role models and pathfinders for the superintendency. This phase of the research turned out to be the most exciting and inspiring as we interviewed this group of extraordinary women educators. We hope to share some of that inspiration with our present and future audiences.

EA 028043

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I. Increasing Numbers of Women in Leadership Roles in Public Education

The majority of women superintendents who participated in this study certainly understood and mastered the male-dominated world of public school administration in order to obtain and do their jobs successfully, At the same time, they are redefining how to become and to be a superintendent. A majority of them believe that as women they bring special characteristics to the job: "fairness, a sense of justice, collaborative style," "communication skills: women are more tactful and better able to resolve conflicts and negotiate," "intuition and sensitivity to people," "involvement of many people in decision-making," and "a very strong instructional background."

If one of the tasks of selecting able leaders for public schools in the twenty-first century is hiring those who have strong instructional skills, who can encourage the talents of others, who can communicate effectively with multiple constituencies, and who can unite diverse citizen groups to solve school problems, then more than 10 percent of the nation's superintendents should be women.

Based on the findings of this research project on Virginia's first women superintendents, how should aspiring women use the stories of these role models to make their way to the superintendency?

A. First, by SETTING CLEAR AND SPECIFIC CAREER GOALS.

The pathway to the superintendency in Virginia for the majority of women in terms of titled positions was: Teacher -- Principal -- Assistant Superintendent -- Superintendent. Most women were principals in elementary schools and most were assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction. Progress was rarely linear, however. For most women, the route was better described as a self-created pathway made within a context of complex personal and professional choices. This finding parallels results of other studies of women leaders (Hill & Ragland, 1995; McDade & Drake, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1989; Stockard, 1985).

Directly related to the idea of setting clear and specific goals early in the career is another caveat for aspiring women--acquire essential educational and professional experiences. Literature related to women and leadership suggests it is critical for women to 'see themselves in the role' of leader (Schneider, 1991). Our study suggested that the merging of three key factors created women who were ready to apply for a superintendency:

*positive self-image as a leader;
*others' positive views of them as effective leaders;
*and a wide range of professional experiences in education culminating in an assistant superintendency.

We have called this idea of women seeing themselves in the role of leader "seeing is believing," and further, we have identified it as a process of accumulating self-confidence which generally began when a mentor suggested to a woman that she could be a superintendent.

B. Second, by USING A VARIETY OF STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME PERCEIVED internal and external BARRIERS TO their ADVANCEMENT.

Barriers perceived by women in this study were: sex-role stereotyping (superintendency is a man's job) particularly on the part of school boards doing the hiring; sexism; lack of political savvy on the women's parts; difficulty breaking into that first administrative job; feeling they had to be more qualified than male counterparts; other women who would rather work with men or did not understand these women's aspiration to become superintendent; and balancing home and professional lives.

Four key factors which assisted them to overcome any perceived barriers to their progress were:

*Powerful motivation
*Successful career-family configurations
*Guidance of mentors and spouses
*Extraordinary perseverance

In addition, the women used these strategies for success to get past perceived barriers. They:

*Obtained proper credentials--the doctorate
*Became more persistent about their career goals
*Watched successful male superintendents
*Followed advice of gatekeepers and mentors
*Waited for family circumstances to change so they could be mobile
*Maintained a positive attitude about their future
*Watched for superintendencies which were a "fit" between their personal and professional skills and the needs of the school division
*Learned to look for the right "chemistry" between them and the school board with whom they were interviewing

C. Third, an essential ingredient in obtaining a superintendency for all women in this study was **USING MENTORS EFFECTIVELY.**

The women in this study had mentors in three areas of their lives--professor mentors in doctoral programs, on-the-job principal and superintendent mentors, and spouse

mentors. These mentors provided different types of support for the women. Professor mentors acknowledged women's intellectual and leadership abilities, suggested the women could "do" an administrative job, pushed the women to complete doctorates, linked them with networks of contacts, and gave them recommendations. Principal mentors acknowledged women's leadership abilities and gave them challenging administrative responsibilities. Superintendent mentors took the women to regional leadership meetings helped them obtain critical administrative experiences, and gave them challenging administrative assignments.

D. **Finally, aspiring women need to consult their own attitudes and ideas** about becoming superintendents. When we asked the participants in this study why more women were not superintendents in Virginia, the answers were varied, but there were several common themes in the responses:

*Women who are superintendents do not necessarily know which other women in the state desire to be superintendents;
*Aspiring women may lack total commitment to becoming a superintendent or "rush it a little bit and not obtain all the experience they need or "maximize what they do in all positions" before the superintendency; they need to understand that becoming a superintendent does not happen "overnight";
*Some respondents felt women needed to find out the rules on the "inside of the circle" before trying to make changes in how women access the positions; and
*Some respondents felt women need to take it less personally when they do not get the first job they interview for--that they should concentrate on doing the present job well.

II. Translating Successful Teaching Experiences into Effective Administrative Leadership

Women enter teaching considering it a lifelong commitment (Shakeshaft, 1989), and the women in this study did likewise. They did not have their eyes on a career beyond the classroom, and they stayed in the classroom longer than their male counterparts in Virginia before obtaining their first administrative position.

Women in this study also spent more time obtaining a variety of educational experiences than most male colleagues. This was partly because they took self-determined routes to the superintendency rather than a typical, hierarchical career path. It was also because they perceived that they needed to be "so much more qualified" than male colleagues.

In the end, however, in-depth instructional experiences at all levels of a school system, which began when they were teachers, gave the women self-confidence to become superintendents. These experiences also gave them the skills to lead effectively on behalf of students and communities. One woman said it this way: "Job experience especially [was important]. I think being a teacher is critical--I had many years of experience in the classroom. And I have great empathy for being a teacher."

Overwhelmingly, we heard in each woman's own way that strong instructional leadership and a focus on what students needed to learn was something special they brought as women to their superintendencies. In addition, one of the biggest satisfactions about being a superintendent was "helping school boards and communities focus on instruction, getting programs for children, and then watching test scores and all the other indicators show you that you and your staff are making the right decisions."

Lastly, we gained a strong sense from our discussions with these women that they used all their educational experiences, from the classroom to the central office, as a memory bank from which they drew remembered experiences to help them understand the issues and problems which their teachers and staffs faced. One woman described it this way: "In each place I've been I've made a contribution. . . to the people. . . I took the things I learned in those positions and put them all here. I could tell you what I learned and experienced in each place, and I could show you here. . . where it is. . .".

III. Summary

The women who participated in this study recounted many different stories when they talked about becoming and being superintendents. They have varying opinions about the open-mindedness of school boards, staffs, and constituents toward women as superintendents. They have varying feelings about themselves as women and as leaders. They have taken different paths to obtain their positions.

Generally, however, they feel that it takes a very high level of motivation to become a superintendent; they feel there are many satisfying and challenging aspects of their jobs; and they feel there is a need to encourage other women to seek the superintendency. Their narratives describe not only various career paths to the position, but they describe what it was like to be a woman who wanted to be a superintendent.

In addition to obtaining a descriptive profile of Virginia's first women superintendents, our study has yielded several significant findings about these women. **First**, each woman created her own path to the superintendency within a context of complex personal and professional choices. **Second,** barriers to the superintendency exist because the public school administrative world is predominantly white and male. **Third,** the women approached potential barriers as challenges to overcome through a variety of strategies. **Fourth,** these first women are beginning to redefine traditional ideas about how

superintendents lead in Virginia. They tend to speak of their achievements in terms of teacher and student successes. And, **finally**, when asked if they would still seek the superintendency, each one enthusiastically replied, "You bet!!"

WOMEN IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY

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